

Government Reform Committee
“MS-13 and Counting:
Gang Activity in Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties”
Opening Statement of Chairman Tom Davis

September 6, 2006

Good afternoon, and thank you for coming out to Takoma Park. Today we follow our recent hearing exploring gang activity in Northern Virginia with an examination of gang activity in Maryland’s Montgomery and Prince George’s Counties. In July, we looked at the surprisingly strong presence of MS-13 and other Latino gangs in Northern Virginia. Maryland also has a strong MS-13 presence, but it doesn’t stop there: if you thought Crips and Bloods were the stuff of Los Angeles gang wars, think again.

During our July hearing, we learned two basic truths: (1) gangs are transient; and, (2) gangs require more than just a law enforcement response. The bottom line is that gangs don’t observe neat jurisdictional boundaries. We have reports of Maryland law enforcement picking up gang bangers with Virginia license plates, and gang members from Maryland currently serving time in Virginia jails. With this level of mobility, law enforcement needs to be able to move easily across boundaries, too—whether city and state, federal and local, or simply across state lines.

The Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force, from which we heard in July, is doing just this: coordinating efforts among 13 Virginia jurisdictions. Law enforcement officials in Montgomery and Prince George's Counties are coordinating through a similar organization called the Regional Area Gang Enforcement Task Force. This "RAGE" Task Force includes state, local, and federal law enforcement, including the park police in whose jurisdiction gang activity often takes place.

Many recognize that the Northern Virginia Task Force has been extremely successful in its suppression and enforcement efforts. And, some go so far as to attribute increased gang activity here in Maryland to this success in Northern Virginia. As we craft our regional strategies for combating gangs, we need to be careful not to cut off one head only to see it sprout anew somewhere else. We need to recognize fighting gang activity requires regional coordination, and we look forward to hearing about this coordination from the enforcement officials from Montgomery and Prince George's Counties.

But, if our previous hearing taught us anything, it's that enforcement is only part of the equation. Any response to gang activity must include a prevention and

intervention component also. Prevention and intervention help us answer the important questions, such as how do you divert at-risk kids from the lure of gangs, and how do you best address the needs of gang-involved youth looking for something more. Gangs prey on young people who lack role models, who spend time on the street with no constructive activities, and who are simply lost in the system. These wanderers become the perpetrators of the gruesome murders, stabbings, and violent felonies we too often read about in the papers. And, that's all before they turn 16.

Fortunately, like the Northern Virginia Regional Gang Task Force, Montgomery and Prince George's Counties have developed effective prevention and intervention tools. We will hear from elected officials and representatives from the Department of Health and Human Services from these two counties regarding their public health approach to a public safety issue.

We will also hear from the Director of the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center, the Warden of the Montgomery County Correctional Facility, and a former gang member-turned-small business owner, each of whom directs their own unique approach to helping those who are at-risk or are current or former gang members.

None of the good news we will hear today would have been possible without the efforts of my good friends and colleagues Frank Wolf and Chris Van Hollen.

Congressman Wolf's response to gang activity in his district triggered a region-wide recognition of the presence and prevalence of gang activity, and he has secured significant federal funding to fight gangs in Northern Virginia.

Congressman Van Hollen also has secured over \$2.3 million in federal funding to support joint county initiatives, including the Crossroads Youth Opportunity Center, community-based after-school programs, and increased policing activities.

When you put the federal funding and the good activities it supports together, what you get is safer streets, safer schools, and alternatives for at-risk youth. Ultimately, this means (1) your neighborhood is safer, and (2) this region will not become a haven for gang activity and violence.

But challenges persist. When Frank and I went to El Salvador last year, we learned of prisons that are recruiting grounds for MS-13 and other violent gangs in this region. In fact, a convicted murderer who escaped from a Salvadoran prison and sought refuge in Virginia's Loudoun County was just picked up by federal and local law enforcement, and is now in federal custody awaiting deportation. We are aware of the unique challenges gangs present, and must continue trying to identify

and understand the sources of the problem—be they international jails or the streets and schools in our own backyards.

This is why we call hearings like this one: to hear about the successes of our law enforcement and prevention communities and how we as Congress can continue to assist them best.

I want to thank all of our witnesses for being here today, and, I would like to thank the City of Takoma Park for so generously making this facility available to us.